Urban Agriculture in Montevideo and Rosario: A response to crisis or a stable component of the urban landscape?

According to local records, food production has taken place in intra and periurban areas of Montevideo since its founding in 1724. In the 1950s, state programmes were developed to promote intensive vegetable gardening (Blixen, Colnago and Gonzalez, 2006), and since the 1990s, local government has encouraged the production of vegetables, fruits and animals in and around the city. Recent studies have identified a great diversity of production systems, with the yield intended for household consumption as well as for sale (Santandreu et al., 2000; Castro et al., 2006). A similar situation can be seen in Rosario, where urban agriculture activities have been promoted by NGOs since the mid-1980s and by the municipal government since the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1997, at least 2,859 registered family, community and school gardens were producing approximately 1,400 tons of food per year (Lattuada and Lattuca, 1998).

Times of crisis
During the economic crisis around the turn of the millennium, the role of urban agriculture changed. Thousands of people lost their jobs, and therefore, found themselves without any way to sustain their families. While the impact reached all social strata in both countries, it was strongest among the lower/working and middle classes. For example, in 2001, 61 per cent of the population of Rosario lived in poverty, and over 30 per cent in extreme poverty.

Governments and civil society developed a number of responses to this crisis. The national government of Argentina put in place measures like temporary assistance, employment programmes and distribution of food bags or boxes to those groups most hard hit by the crisis. Civil society introduced strategies of self-employment and created soli-darity networks based on bartering. In this context, urban agriculture was seen as a productive alternative, and was thus promoted by civil society and backed and supported by local governments. Other stakeholders like NGOs, cooperation agencies and universities also actively participated. In Rosario, the municipal government re-launched its Urban Agriculture Programme, and hundreds of family and community gardens were created in the city.

After the crisis
As the crisis passed the role of urban agriculture changed again. In both cities, poverty and unemployment declined, social policies were strengthened and new strategies of assistance for the least-favoured sectors were developed. For example, in Uruguay, the creation of the Ministry of Social...
established their identity and legitimised their social and political space in sustainable urban development.

During the crisis, urban agriculture played an important role, contributing to food security, strengthening the social networks of low-income sectors and encouraging the social participation of thousands of people. After the crisis, urban agriculture became a less widespread activity but one with a better capacity to incorporate new issues of interest, new players and new strategies of political and social participation.

New issues
The thousands of people who developed urban gardens during the crisis years were mainly motivated by the desire to gain access to food and savings. More recently, urban farmers identified new reasons to continue, like consistent access to fresh and high-quality food (free from agro-toxins), income generation, community solidarity and building skills and self-esteem, but also the opportunity to influence public policy. In Montevideo the local government is promoting agriculture through the primary schools, in order to build local capacities and incorporate urban agriculture in education. In Rosario, the members of the Network of Urban Gardeners (Huerteros) were supported by the Municipal Urban Agriculture Programme in their development of two collective agribusinesses. They now sell their products at weekly farmers’ markets and deliver bags of produce to homes and to supermarkets.

New stakeholders
During the crisis, new players became interested in urban agriculture. Local governments developed or strengthened the municipal urban agriculture programmes and the universities and NGOs provided technical assistance to urban farmers. In Montevideo, the University of the Republic created its Food Production and Community Organization Programme (PPAOC), while local government and various NGOs intensified their support of community and school gardens. Private companies also began to mobilise resources for urban agriculture, often through foundations engaged in Corporate Social Responsibility. In Rosario, the Rosario Foundation, which is sponsored by a group of local private enterprises, finances the implementation of multifunctional productive spaces, like garden parks which are linked to the municipal Urban Agriculture Programme and the Network of Huerteros. In this way, urban producers have established their identity and legitimised their social and political space in sustainable urban development.

New strategies
In the crisis period, innovative forms of social participation and organisation emerged that went beyond the networking of farmers. In Rosario, the urban farmers, consumers and the local government organised a common forum: Sustainable Urban Agriculture for the Community Network.

It would seem that urban agriculture has become a permanent activity – although perhaps less widespread – now that the deepest moments of crisis have passed. Its role is now more to promote local development and the economic and social inclusion of those who practice it. The multiple benefits of urban agriculture have spread to a wide spectrum of the population, and it has helped to transform abandoned lots and spaces into productive gardens and renewed neighbourhoods. More importantly, it has helped raise the self-esteem and participation of the urban farmers, who are now considered to be (new) urban stakeholders, capable of influencing local public policies, and thus increasing resilience of these the cities and their inhabitants.

Alain Santandreu, IPES – Promoción del Desarrollo Sostenible alain@ipes.org, alain_santandreu@yahoo.com
Alberto Gómez Perazzoli, Rural Montevideo Unit, Municipal Government of Montevideo, agomezperazzoli@gmail.com, umr@piso3.imm.gub.uy
Raúl Terrile, Mariana Ponce, Urban Agriculture Program, Municipality of Rosario, agr_urbana@rosario.gov.ar

References

